CHAPTER 7: PUBLIC FACILITIES & SERVICES

Introduction

Public facilities and services play a vital role in the health, safety and general welfare of a community. Successful communities provide education, law enforcement, emergency, health and other services. Very successful communities provide these services efficiently and effectively while fairly distributing the cost burden to those who benefit, either directly or indirectly. Communities experiencing rapid growth and increasing demand for services while relying solely on property taxes for revenue generation will be less likely to provide those services efficiently and effectively. Many participants in the 2005-2006 scoping meetings held throughout Flathead County (see Appendix B: Public Involvement Summary) indicated a desire for increased levels of public facilities and services, such as more police officers and better schools. Services cost money and increasing services costs more money. Setting goals for maintaining or increasing the level of services and facilities enjoyed by the residents of Flathead County, while exploring ways to fairly share the cost burden among those who use services (such as visitors and part time residents) is appropriate for a growth policy.

Goal

G.26 Provide cost effective solid waste collection, transport, and safe, environmentally responsible disposal to all communities.

Policies

P.261 Create design criteria for new development to ensure the safe, efficient, and effective collection and disposal of solid waste. Require all new subdivision site plans to be reviewed by the solid waste district and/or private hauler.

P.26.2 New subdivisions should be encouraged to establish centralized refuse and recycling collection sites within the development when curb-side pick-up is not feasible.

P.26.3 New development should be encouraged to utilize contractor haul of refuse.

P.26.4 Solid waste containers and disposal methods in rural areas should require measures such as animal-proofing and public education so as to discourage the attraction of wildlife.

P.26.5 Promote and encourage increased opportunities for community recycling through recycling pilot programs and the initiation of public-private partnerships.

P.26.6 Encourage safe disposal of household hazardous wastes through education and collection programs.

P.26.7 Ensure that programs for junk vehicle collection and disposal are available and encourage stricter enforcement for existing laws.

P.26.8 Impacts to the local community of green box collection sites should be mitigated at the time of construction, improvement, and expansion of the facility. This should include visual screening, safety improvements and dust mitigation.

Goal

G.27 Safe, efficient and environmentally sound collection and disposal of solid waste.

Policies

P.27.1 Contract hauling should be encouraged in all new developments to reduce traffic and disposal burden at satellite container sites (green boxes).

P.27.2 Flathead County Solid Waste District should perform a needs analysis to assess current and future levels of service to provide cost effective and efficient solid waste collection services within the County.

P.27.3 Encourage county-wide recycling program(s) to reduce the rate at which landfill approaches maximum capacity.

P.27.4 New funding mechanisms for continued solid waste disposal activities as well as future expansion should be explored.

Goal

G.28 Efficient and effective waste water treatment and drinking water delivery

Policies

P.28.1 Encourage high density development in areas that will be served by community sewer systems that treat to municipal standards.

P.28.2 Areas not conducive to individual on-site sewage disposal systems because of flooding, ponding, seasonal high water tables, bedrock conditions, severe slope conditions and no access to a community sewage system should be discouraged from development.

P.28.3 Prepare a comprehensive water quality management plan for the county.

P.28.4 Initiate the development of a regional wastewater treatment plan.

P.28.5 Work to engage water and sewer districts in the county development processes.

P.28.6 Require technologically advanced wastewater treatment methods for individual septic systems where they are needed to protect water quality, such as areas close to surface water or areas deemed necessary.

P.28.7 Encourage wastewater treatment facilities and technologies adequate to meet or exceed water quality standards.

P.28.8 Implement scientifically defensible protection zones for aquifers susceptible to potential contamination and limit land uses to low intensity development in these zones.

P.28.9 Land division resulting in residential densities greater than an average of one dwelling unit per five acres should be discouraged in areas of high groundwater of five feet below ground surface or less which are not served by a public sewer district.

Goal

G.29 Improve, protect, and maintain drinking water resources.

Policies

P.29.1 In compliance with state regulations developers should provide evidence that drinking water of sufficient quantity and quality is available in areas of proposed development.

P.29.2 Promote the installation of community sewer and/or water services in areas where the quantity and/or quality of drinking water resources are threatened.

P.29.3 Identify wellhead protection areas for public wells and land uses in those areas should be limited as to limit the risk of drinking water contamination.

P.29.4 Land use and subdivision activities should not threaten drinking water sources.

Goal

G.30 Safe and healthy individual wastewater treatment

Policies

P.30.1 Areas of higher susceptibility to impacts from septic systems due to soils, depth to groundwater, proximity to sensitive surface waters, topography, and/or density of development should be identified.

P.30.2 Develop the feasibility of a countywide wastewater management plan for the maintenance and management of septic systems.

P.30.3 Develop an educational brochure that explains management of septic systems and the impacts associated with inadequate management of individual systems. Promote the document by distributing it to home owners and buyers in Flathead County.

Goal

G.31 Growth that does not place unreasonable burden on the ability of the school district to provide quality education.

Policies

P.31.1 Consider a school district's ability to accommodate new students as part of the proposed subdivision review process.

P.31.2 Consider the needs for future school building sites as development occurs.

P.31.3 Determine common characteristics of developments most likely to add school children to the local schools and identify incentives for projects to mitigate impacts.

P.31.4 Support multi-use of schools/parks and other community meeting places.

Goal

G.32 Maintain consistently high level of fire, ambulance and emergency 911 response services in Flathead County as growth occurs.

Policies

P.32.1 Require new subdivisions to have adequate on-site water capacity and recharge for fire protection.

P.32.2 Support mutual aid agreements between rural and municipal fire districts.

P.32.3 Subdivisions outside of existing rural fire districts should be annexed into the nearest district if possible.

P.32.4 Ensure convenient access to and within all subdivisions for the largest emergency service vehicles.

P.32.5 Encourage two or more subdivision access points in areas of high and extreme fire hazard.

P.32.6 Encourage subdivisions to either mitigate the impacts of delayed ambulance response times or limit density of development in identified rural areas.

P.32.7 Identify target level of service (LOS) for emergency 911 call processing and work to achieve and maintain that target as growth occurs. This should include security, survivability and redundancy of facilities and services.

Goal

G.33 Maintain consistently high level of law enforcement services in Flathead County as growth occurs.

Policies

P.33.1 Create a seamless emergency response system through a regional 911 emergency response provider system.

P.33.2 Attempt to increase the current ratio of patrol officers per 1,000 residents to meet the growing number of calls for assistance.

P.33.3 Support crime prevention through planning and community design.

P.33.4 Develop a comprehensive public response plan for sheriffs and fire districts to support growth and development in the county.

Goal

G.34 Communicate growth issues with utility providers to address health, safety and welfare of the community.

Policies

P.34.1 Add appropriate agencies to the referrals during the subdivision review process.

P.34.2 Coordinate with all utilities for co-location easements to ensure adequate easements for all current and future utilities at time of final plat.

P.34.3 Promote land use patterns that permit logical, predictable and effective extension and integration of utilities.

P.34.4 Establish standardized regulations for wireless and fiber optics communications infrastructure that ensure the following are maintained: public health, safety, general welfare, convenience, natural resources, and the visual environment/appearances.

PART 1: Solid Waste (see Goals 26 and 27)

Flathead County Solid Waste District

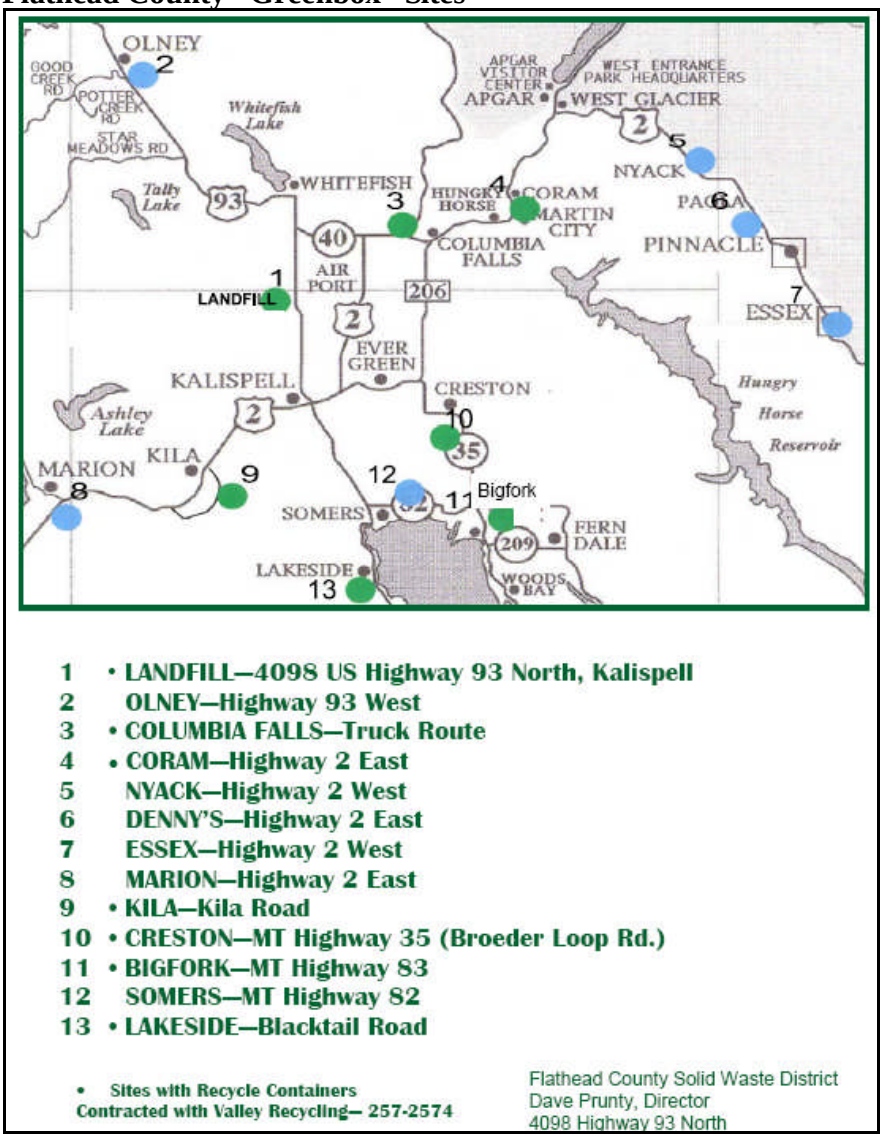
Solid waste disposal is provided by Flathead County Solid Waste District. The District provides refuse collection, disposal services, hazardous waste collection, and recycling opportunities to all county residents. In 1969 the Flathead County Solid Waste District was created by resolution. The district was created to meet the need for suitable areas and facilities to dispose of the refuse generated by county residents, commercial establishments and industries. The district boundaries coincide with county boundaries. The district is governed by a board of seven appointed members. The district is enterprise funded, meaning that fees for disposing solid waste are used to fund all operations and activities. In 2005 the district processed approximately 116,000 tons of solid waste.

Facilities and programs

The Flathead County landfill is located five miles north of the city of Kalispell on US Highway 93. The landfill is permitted for waste management activities on approximately 80-acres, with a total of 275-acres dedicated for current and future waste management needs. The facility operates seven days a week and permits county residents to drop off waste at the county landfill or dispose of household refuse at one of 12 container or "green box" sites.

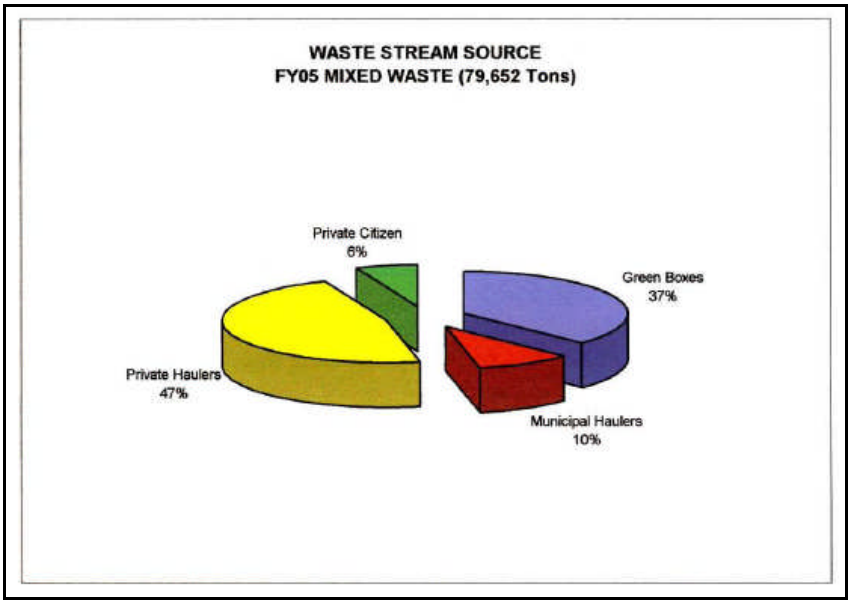
Container sites are located in the communities of Bigfork, Columbia Falls, Coram, Creston, Denny's, Essex, Kila, Somers, Olney, Nyack, Marion, and Lakeside. They are shown in Figure 7.1. Refuse accumulated at these sites is hauled by the district to the Flathead County landfill. As shown in Figure 7.2, waste travels to the landfill via the following four methods: individual private citizen haul, contracted private company haulers, municipal haulers, and green box disposal. Contracted private hauling companies are the most utilized method, followed by green box disposal, municipal haulers and individual private citizen haul.

Figure 7.1
Flathead County "Greenbox" Sites



Source: Flathead County Solid Waste District

Figure 7.2
Waste Sources in 2005

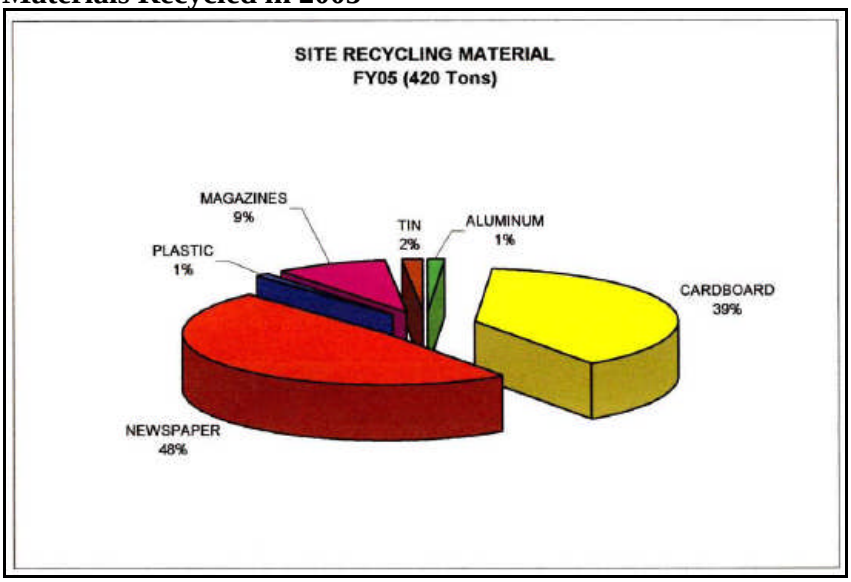


Source: 2005 Solid Waste Report, Flathead County Solid Waste District

Recycling

The Solid Waste District funds the county "WasteNot" consumer education program to increase awareness of solid waste issues with emphasis on recycling, waste reduction, and safe disposal of household hazardous waste. In the county recycling programs provide opportunity to recycle cardboard, newspaper, tin, aluminum, and plastic bottles and milk jugs. Recycling containers are available at the Flathead County Landfill, and the Columbia Falls, Coram, Kila, Creston, Bigfork and Lakeside collection sites (Figure 7.1). The District maintains a contract with Valley Recycling Center for the recycling of household recyclable materials. As is shown in Figure 7.3, the most frequently recycled material is newspaper, followed by cardboard, magazines, tin, aluminum, and finally plastic. Glass recycling is not currently offered. In addition to commonly recycled household materials, lead batteries, used oil, and materials from appliances and junk vehicles may also be recycled.

Figure 7.3
Materials Recycled in 2005



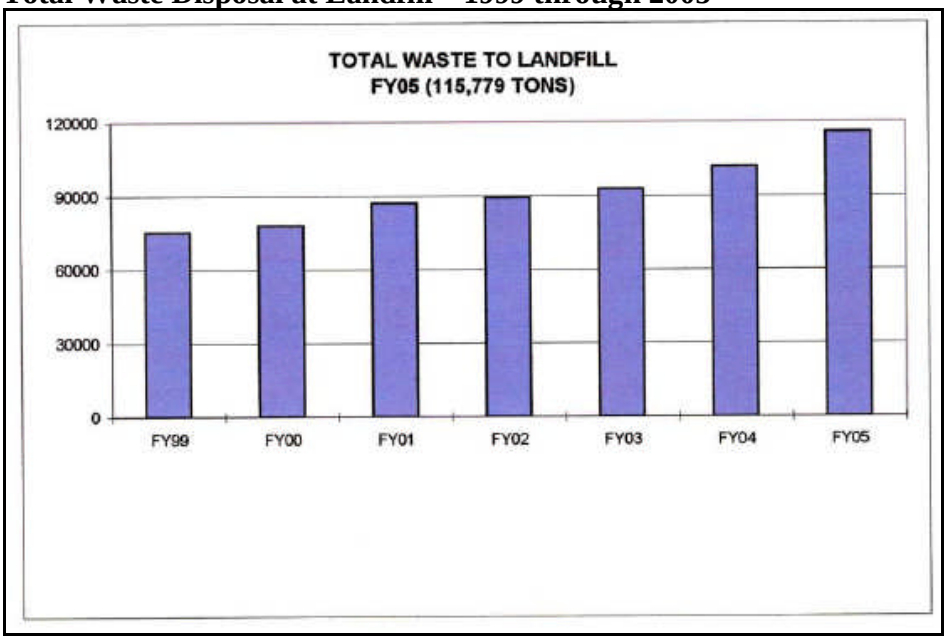
Source: 2005 Solid Waste Report, Flathead County Solid Waste District

The Solid Waste District maintains a household hazardous waste program (HHW) that collected over 8,000 gallons of household hazardous waste in 2005. Residents can dispose of HHW at no cost while small businesses have the opportunity to dispose of HHW once a year for a fee. Household hazardous waste is collected and transported to a hazardous waste facility where it is either recycled or disposed of properly. Much of the household hazardous waste in the county is not disposed of properly. The District estimates that Flathead County residents dispose of between 80 and 240 tons of hazardous products in their garbage on an annual basis.

As growth in the County has continued steadily, the volume of waste collected and disposed of in the landfill reflects this. The District has witnessed a 40% increase in tons of refused hauled from container sites between 2000 and 2005. Total tons of refuse disposed of per month at the landfill has increased from 8,275 tons to 9,869 tons from 2004 to 2005, resulting in a 19% increase over the past year. The summer months result in the largest volume of waste disposal, with a 500 ton per day disposal rate. The increase in waste disposal during the summer can be attributed to the influx of visitors and seasonal residents. The total amount of waste disposed of in the landfill in 2005 equaled 115,779 tons[1]. Figure 7.4 shows a steady increase in waste disposal per year for the last seven years.

[1] 2005 Solid Waste Report, Flathead County Solid Waste District

Figure 7.4
Total Waste Disposal at Landfill – 1999 through 2005



Source: 2005 Solid Waste Report, Flathead County Solid Waste District

The increasing amount of refuse being collected from container sites has resulted in an increase in wildlife attraction to the container areas, including bears and large game. A visual degradation of the sites due to litter and lack of appropriate screening is another result. Illegal dumping of business wastes has increased also. The increase of individual households' hauling refuse to the landfill and to container sites has resulted in litter along transportation routes because refuse is improperly covered or secured, and because there is increased traffic congestion at the container sites and landfill.

Solid Waste Projections

The landfill is undergoing an expansion plan to enlarge its licensed boundary of active operations to 120 acres of land. The expansion will result in 90 acres of area solely for the purpose of waste disposal and the remaining land for landfill facilities, operational area, and buffer area. In 2005, the District made improvements to the Creston and Columbia Falls container sites, enlarging the capacity and installing fencing. The District has plans to improve the Marion and Somers sites in 2006.

The total 275-acre landfill area dedicated for current and future waste disposal needs has a capacity of 29 years if the increase in tons of waste disposed grows at an 8% annual rate, and a 57 year capacity if the tons of waste disposed grows at an annual rate of 2%. However, if the 19% increase seen from 2004 to 2005 becomes the norm, then the capacity of the landfill will be reduced to 11 years. Thus, the county must address ways to slow the increase of refuse growth, such as a more effective recycling program, and seek alternatives for the time when the landfill is full.

Given the growing increases in annual waste production, the landfill is a critical amenity for public health in the county. The landfill has approximately 29 years of constant waste disposal, less if the relative volume of waste disposal increases. As the community grows adjacent to landfill operations it is critical to maintain an understanding and application of compatible land use decision making. Land uses which are compatible to district operations (e.g. low intensity industrial and commercial, etc.) should be encouraged and uses not compatible discouraged (e.g. medium to high density residential).

Several waste disposal services not available from the District are provided by the private sector. Hauling of individual refuse is accomplished by private contractors, as well as tire disposal, Class III disposal of rock, dirt, concrete, and clean wood, and recycling facilities.

PART 2: Drinking Water and Wastewater Treatment (see Goals 28 through 30)

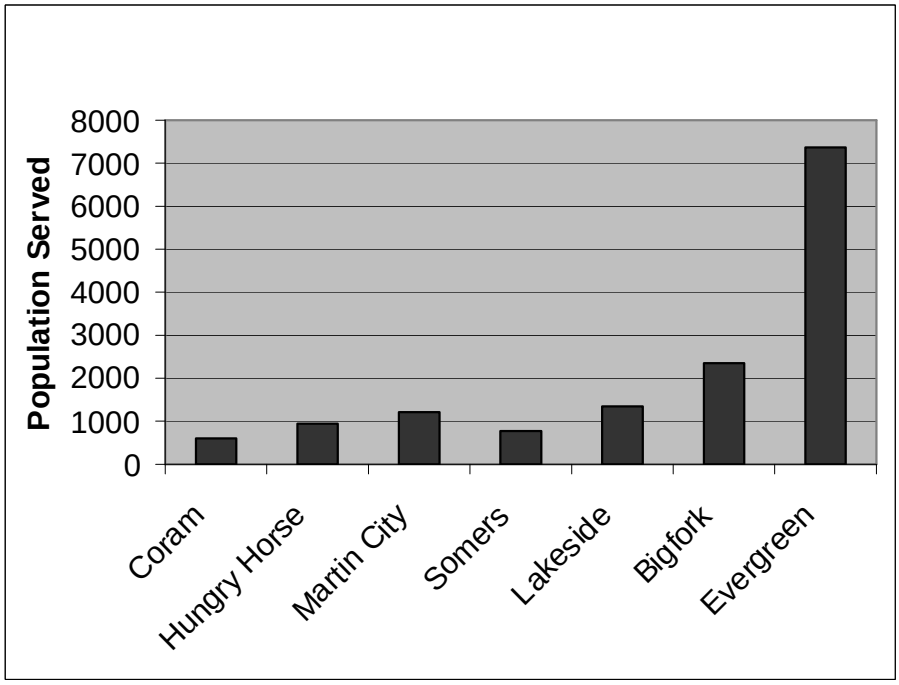
County Water and Sewer Districts

The majority of developments in the unincorporated areas of the county utilize individual septic systems and individual water wells to sustain development. Twenty-six Flathead County water and/or sewer districts have been established to serve larger scale development or rural communities. The ability to provide public sewer and/or public water services is a major factor influencing potential density and type of development in a community as the necessary land area for septic systems and individual water wells is not a limiting factor. As these public services allow for higher densities, the public water systems can have hundreds to thousands of residents utilizing one or more wells. This makes protection of wellhead areas vital to limiting the risk of contamination to these public drinking water sources. Water and sewer districts in the unincorporated areas of Flathead County are shown in Map 7.1.

Existing Major Water and Sewer Districts

Seven major water and sewer districts, as seen in Figure 7.5, serve entire unincorporated communities, half of which provide both water and wastewater treatment services. These water and sewer districts in the communities of Bigfork, Coram, Evergreen, Hungry Horse, Lakeside, Martin City and Somers each serve between 600 and 5,500 residents and businesses. The Coram, Hungry Horse and Martin City Districts offer public water services only. No public sewer treatment is available. The Bigfork and Lakeside Districts operate their own sewer treatment facilities, while Somers contracts with Lakeside for sewer treatment, and Evergreen contracts with the City of Kalispell for sewer treatment services. Bigfork, Lakeside, Somers and Evergreen each grew by over 50% between 1990 and 2000. For more on these individual sewer and water districts, including applicable DEQ reports, see Appendix A: Baseline Analysis.

Figure 7.5
Major County Water and Sewer Districts in Unincorporated Areas



Source: US Census Bureau 2000

Existing Minor Water and Sewer Districts

The remaining 19 county water and wastewater treatment systems listed below serve large subdivision areas, not entire communities. Many smaller county water and sewer districts were to serve one or two large subdivisions and often provide only water services. These systems are often comprised of one or two wells providing drinking water, and several are serviced by a county or city sewer district. The number of full time residents which these districts serve is approximately 20 to 400.

- Big Mountain County Sewer District (sewer only)
- Eagle Ridge Estates County Water and Sewer District (water only)
- Essex County Water and Sewer District (water only)
- Flathead County Water District #8 (Happy Valley – water only)
- Foy's Lakeside County Water District (water only)
- Glacier Ranch County Water and Sewer District (inactive - water and sewer)
- Green Tree Meadows HOA County Water and Sewer District (water only)
- Happy Valley Area B County Water District (water only)
- Kelsey County Water District (water only)
- Lakeshore Heights County Water District (water only)
- Meadow Hills County Water and Sewer District (water only)
- Meadow Lake County Water and Sewer District (water and sewer)

- Panoramic Mountain River Heights County Water District (water only)
- Pleasant View Homesites County Water and Sewer District(water only)
- Ranch County Water and Sewer District (water only)
- Smith Lake Vista County Water and Sewer District (water only)
- Stillwater Estates County Water and Sewer District (water only)
- Village County Sewer District (consolidated into the Kalispell system)
- Wapiti Acres County Water and Sewer District (water only)

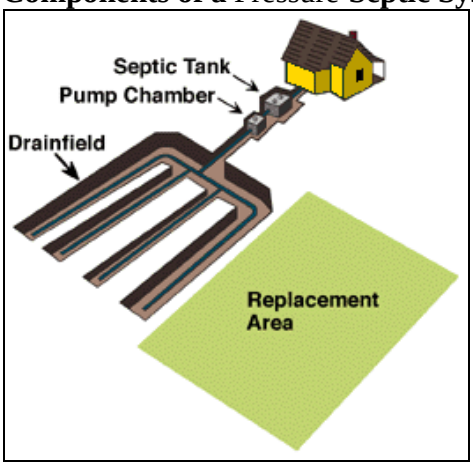
Septic Systems

Individual wastewater treatment technologies are utilized in a majority of the county because rural development is not often located within a water and sewer district. Several scenarios have arisen throughout the county as areas are witnessing increased growth.

- Waterfront communities, once characterized as seasonal, have begun to host year round residents.
- Development has increased in rural communities and on the fringe of urban areas beyond the service area of public water and sewer.
- An increasing number of inadequately maintained and aging systems scattered in the rural areas.

Figure 7.6 shows a typical pressure septic system that contains five main components: a pipe from the home or business, a septic tank, a pump chamber, a drainfield and the soil. Microbes in the soil remove the majority of contaminants from the wastewater before it reaches the groundwater. Septic tanks are buried, watertight and hold wastewater long enough to allow solids to settle and oil and grease to float to the surface. The remaining wastewater is discharged into the drainfield and percolates through the soil, removing bacteria, viruses and nutrients.

Figure 7.6
Components of a Pressure **Septic System**

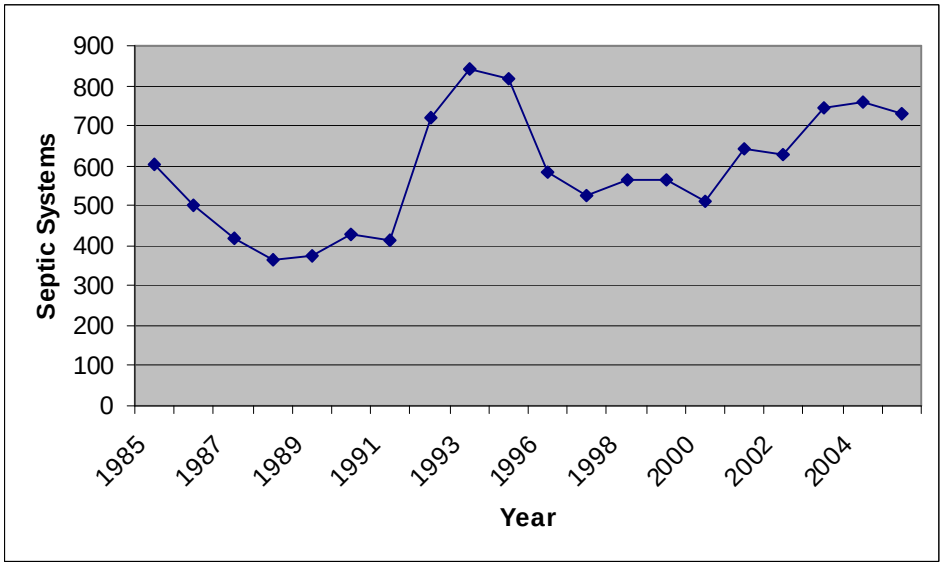


Source: Washington State University
http://cru.cahe.wsu.edu/CEPublications/eb1673/eb1673.html

Alternative systems are appropriate in areas of less suitable soils, areas of increasing development, and areas of groundwater depth of 5 to 10 feet or near bodies of water. These systems can provide higher levels of pre and post treatment and can be modified to provide treatment systems that cater to specific wastewater treatment needs. The advanced systems incorporate a variety of technologies and are manufactured by a variety of companies. The US Environmental Protection Agency currently lists 27 alternative septic treatment system technologies utilizing a variety of treatment methods[2].

As the county population has increased notable growth in areas without public water and sewer systems has occurred. Map 7.1 displays existing septic systems in the county. Figure 7.7 shows the number of septic systems that received approval at final inspection by the county Department of Environmental Health from 1985 though 2005. A large increase in the number of septic systems in the mid-1990s with another notable increase in the early part of this decade is shown. Table 7.1 shows the number of septic systems that were approved between 1990 and 2005. The table shows a 44% increase in the number of septic systems approved between 2000 and 2005

Figure 7.7
Septic Systems Approved **– 1985 through 2005**



Source: Flathead County Department of Environmental Health Services, 2006

[2] http://www.epa.gov/ne/assistance/ceitts/wastewater/techs.html

Table 7.1
Number of Septic Systems approved **in 1990 and 2000 through 2005**

Year	1990	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	Change 2000-2005
Number of Septic System	430	509	643	630	746	758	732	44%

Source: Flathead County Department of Environmental Health Services, 2006

Septic System Failure

Many new residents in rural areas are unaware of the location of their existing septic systems and are untrained in the proper maintenance of these systems. Septic systems that are inadequately maintained cause bacterial contamination of groundwater and recreational waters, algal growth in water bodies and wetlands, and ultimately impact public health. Improperly maintained systems contribute to major water quality problems. The second most frequently cited contamination source of groundwater is septic systems, which creates concerns in rural areas characterized by relatively small lot sizes where residents are dependent on individual wells[3].

Septic systems fail when they are overloaded with too much wastewater, when amenities that use large quantities of water such as hot tubs and swimming pools are connected to the system, by household toxics and cleaners, garbage disposals, by improper design or installation and by lack of proper maintenance[5]. After failure of a septic system, nutrients may leach into the groundwater. Failed individual septic systems lead to a dramatic increase in the number of non-point source sources of water pollution discussed in chapter 8 of this growth policy. In 1998 the Flathead County Health Department estimated that more than 50% of all individual septic systems in Flathead County were over 20 years old[4]. Flathead County and DEQ require a designated replacement area for all septic systems.

Community wide septic system management can assist in minimizing part of the impact of septic system use. Management should include public education, planning, design, construction, operation and maintenance, permitting, inspections and monitoring, reporting, and financial assistance and funding to ensure that individual septic systems are permitted in areas that pose no health threats, are constructed properly, and are routinely maintained. Proper maintenance conserves water, protects property values, preserves the tax base, keeps costs low for homeowners and protects public health, residents and the environment[5].

[3] http://www.epa.gov/owm/septic/pubs/septic_guidelines.pdf
[4] Critical Lands Status Report: The North Flathead Valley & The Flathead River Corridor, Flathead Lakers, 2002
[5] http://www.epa.gov/owm/septic/pubs/homeowner_guide_long.pdf

Projected Trends

As is discussed in Chapter 3, Demographics and Housing, population is expected to increase through the year 2025. With this increase, the number of septic systems will increase. The extent to which development is directed to areas served by county water and sewer districts will dictate how much of the new development will utilize individual septic systems. By comparing the rate of septic permitting for the past five years to that of the projected population growth rate, an estimate of the number of new septic systems per year has been obtained. The increase in septic systems over time is dictated by current rates, and current and projected population trends. If population continues to increase at a steady rate, it is assumed the need for septic systems shall increase over time. The rate of increase in the number of septic systems between 2000 and 2005 fluctuated significantly, between a 3% decrease between 2004 and 2005, and a 26% increase between 2000 and 2001. The increase over the period of 2000 to 2005 witnessed a 44% growth rate for septic systems. If this rate of growth were to continue through the year 2015, the number of septic systems permitted in that year would equal approximately 1,580. This indicates the number of septic systems will continue to increase in the near future.

PART 3: Education (see Goal 31)

Flathead County residents enjoy quality public and private educational options. In the public meetings held prior to writing this growth policy (see Appendix B: Public Involvement Summary), residents were asked what they would not change about living in Flathead County. Quotes such as "the quality of the schools in the area", "high quality schools" and "our own children have excellent schooling" were prevalent. Maintaining the level of service for schools in Flathead County will require additional revenue and careful planning.

Flathead County has 19 public elementary school districts and 4 public high school districts. The county is home to Flathead Valley Community College. There are seven private elementary, one private faith-based high school and three therapeutic boarding schools. Approximately 3.69% of school age children in Flathead County are home schooled.[6]

Enrollments have fluctuated drastically as the regional demographics of the county have changed. Overall enrollment for public elementary schools in Flathead County has decreased 4.1%. Enrollment at private elementary schools has increased 35% between 1992 and 2005. Private high school enrollments are up 19% during the same period. The therapeutic boarding schools continue to have increasing enrollment every year. See Table 7.2 for a summary of Flathead County school enrollment and Appendix A: Baseline Analysis for detailed enrollment statistics. Total students enrolled have increased 9% from 15,528 to 16,956 between 1992 and 2005.

[6] Flathead County Superintendent of Schools Office

Table 7.2
Flathead County School Enrollment

	1992	2000	2005	Change 1992-2005
Public Elementary	9,234	8,911	8,853	-4.1%
Private, other and home elementary schools	1,004	1,345	1,361	35%
Public High School	3,744	4,369	4,456	19%
Private, other and home high schools	75	326	372	396%
Flathead Valley Community College	1,471 (1990)	1,614	1,914	30%
TOTALS	**15,528**	**16,565**	**16,956**	**9%**

Source: Flathead County and FVCC

Development patterns in Flathead County are reflected in school enrollments. As people move into high and medium density areas that are affordable to families with children, schools add students. Kila, Helena Flats, Evergreen, West Valley, Smith Valley and Swan River reflect this trend. Schools likely to add students should be incorporated into the subdivision review process to familiarize both school districts and the public with health and safety issues of expanding enrollment. These communities should identify lands on which future schools could be built and plan ahead for acquisition. Such planning will save the taxpayers money and ensure schools are located in safe, logical and efficient locations with good access and space for children to safely recreate. Schools can also boost a sense of community as many activities take place in and around schools. Well maintained, effective schools are sources of pride in a community and should be prioritized.

Areas of low density are usually not affordable to young families with children. School enrollments are declining in these areas. In extreme rural areas where large tracts may still be affordable, such as West Glacier and the North Fork, home schooling is prevalent. In areas such as West Glacier, Creston, Fair Mont-Egan, Cayuse Prairie, Bigfork, Deer Park and Whitefish, school enrollments have decreased.

Population growth, coupled with increased per-student expenditures and facility needs, demand proper planning. Identifying future school lands, offering incentives to developers to mitigate impacts of additional students and asking school officials to be involved in the development process are valuable steps towards a safe and well-educated future.

Table 7.3
Per Student Expenditures

	2000	2005	Change
Average Expenditure per Elementary Student	$5,126.77	$6,045.41	+17.9%
Average Expenditure per High School Student	$6,018.30	$6,777.89	+12.6%

Source: Flathead County and FVCC

Flathead County offers education opportunities after high school. Flathead Valley Community College is a two year college that offers residents educational opportunities for advancement to a four year college, career enhancement and life long learning. A graduate of FVCC can obtain an Associate of Arts, Associate of Science and Associate of Applied Science degrees or a certificate in a variety of programs.

According to the FVCC economic impact fact sheet of October 2005, FVCC skills embodied in the present day workforce increase regional income in the FVCC service area economy by $38.6 million. Altogether, the economy in the FVCC service area owes nearly $50 million of its current labor and non labor income to the past and present efforts of FVCC. This demonstrates FVCC as an engine of economic growth.

PART 4: Emergency Services and Facilities (see Goals 32 and 33)

The provision of fire, ambulance, law enforcement, and 911 services are the community services most directly related to the health, safety and welfare of the public. The impact of growth on these services in Flathead County, which relies heavily on volunteer fire departments and has severe budget restraints, is critical. This county is larger than some states and the ability to continue an acceptable level of emergency services in the face of highly dispersed growth is in jeopardy. Much more work should be done by the emergency services sector to assess capacity and gauge its ability to meet projected demands.

Emergency 911 Services

The role of public safety (911) communications in emergency services has changed significantly in the last 20 years. Cell phones have caused an enormous rise in the number of 911 calls, and difficulty in knowing the location of such emergencies has created the need for sophisticated location technology. Nearly half of all 911 calls are placed from cell phones. In addition, when the public dials 911, there is an expectation that the 911 dispatcher will provide help, before responders arrive on scene. This has placed the dispatcher in the role of the "first" first responder. These and other expectations require emergency communications centers to acquire sophisticated equipment and advanced training for their staff. In Flathead County, these expectations have caused both municipal and county public safety agencies to look at a fully

consolidated 911 dispatch center for all responders in the county. Calls for emergency services will be processed and multi-agency responses more easily coordinated through such a center. The number of calls for service continues to rise, and the need for emergency medical services rises at an even higher rate, likely due to the aging population in our county.

Fire Services

Fire response in Flathead County is covered by 16 volunteer fire departments (see Map 7.2). Fire departments are responsible for increasing services for an increasing population. Development also continues to increase in rural high risk fire areas that are far from services. Many of the departments such as Evergreen are responsible for a high density area equivalent to the surrounding municipal departments of Kalispell, Columbia Falls, and Whitefish. In most cases the municipal and volunteer departments have mutual aid agreements to assist each other for better coverage. In Flathead County the citizens are fortunate to have excellent volunteer departments, although these departments are being stretched greatly. For more information on individual fire districts and services, see Appendix A: Baseline Analysis.

If recent subdivision applications are any indicator, many rural departments will require additional facilities, equipment and staff resources in order to maintain service levels. Response time to a fire location is critical. Response time includes travel time from home or place of employment to the fire station and then to the fire location. The maximum response time in combination with other variables determines the ISO (International Organization for Standardization) rating of a fire department or fire district. ISO ratings range from 1 – 10 with 1 being the best rating. ISO ratings are used by insurance companies to assess risk and base homeowner premiums accordingly. In Flathead County ISO ratings generally range from 6 to 8. Keeping a good ISO rating is important to the fire chiefs and departments; consequently, the Flathead County volunteer fire department chiefs have an important role in future residential growth.

Flathead County can assist by providing fire departments the needed resources during the subdivision review process. Basic water supply requirements and safe access are two of the most obvious ways that subdivisions can proactively accommodate emergency services. Quick, convenient access to a substantial water supply should be on site. Cul-de-sacs should be avoided in fire hazard areas to avoid residents' being trapped because of one access providing both entrance and exit. Road slope standards should be observed in all subdivisions, and legitimate secondary access should be secured or reserved whenever possible.

Ambulance Services

Ambulance services are limited in Flathead County due to the vast size of the county. Basic Life Support (BLS) is the first level of ambulance service and provides non invasive procedures to stabilize and revive patients. Not all rural fire districts are licensed to provide BLS service. BLS districts are shown in Map 7.3. Advanced Life

Support (ALS) is a higher level of service and includes administering drugs and establishing IVs. There are fewer ALS than BLS districts in Flathead County (see Map 7.4). Transporting patients requires a state license and currently is performed only by Kalispell, Whitefish, Bigfork, Marion, Big Mountain and Lakeside Fire Departments and Three Rivers EMS in Columbia Falls. The ALERT helicopter is ALS and transport certified and is designed to reduce response and transport times in rural areas of the county. The ALERT service responds to areas too distant for effective ambulance response or other areas in the county when requested (see Map 7.3).

Growth in Flathead County creates many issues related to provision of emergency ambulance services. Development existing far from ambulance services creates a situation where those who are injured are more likely to die prior to reaching a hospital. To mitigate this unsafe situation, high density development in the county should be directed towards areas reasonably close to emergency services.

Law Enforcement

The Flathead County Sheriff's Department is responsible for protecting residents of the unincorporated areas of the county. Deputies are dedicated to protect the people of Flathead County and the professional enforcement of local, state and federal laws. Currently the Sheriff's Department employs 118 people. About 40% of this total, or 48 patrol officers, provide "on the ground" law enforcement. This is a ratio of .41 patrol officers per 1,000 residents. The remainder work as support, court or jail staff. The adult correctional facility employs 28 staff, and the juvenile facility employs 12. The juvenile facility is regulated by the State of Montana, and the ratio of staff to inmate is almost 1:1.

There are six divisions within the Sheriff's Department

1. Patrol Division
2. Detective Division
3. Adult and Juvenile Division
4. Civil Division
5. Coroner
6. Crime Stoppers

In 2000 the Sheriff's Office responded to about 22,400 calls for assistance. By 2005 the number of calls increased by 60% to 35,700, greater than a 10% increase each year. Because of the ratio of patrol officers to population the Sheriff's office has prioritized call responses. Crimes in progress or life threatening situations receive first priority response and immediate attention. Other calls for assistance are prioritized based on availability of officers and the nature of the call relative to higher priority calls received at the same time.

The Sheriff's Office operates three shifts per day. A minimum of four to six officers are on duty each shift and deployed to specific geographical areas or patrol zones within the unincorporated county. Normally these zones include

- Canyon Area
- Whitefish Area
- Evergreen Area
- Somers/Lakeside Area
- Bigfork Area

An additional officer or two rove the county and assist where needed. The number of calls for assistance is much greater in Evergreen than elsewhere in the unincorporated county. Approximately 60% of the total calls to the Sheriff's Office come from the Evergreen area. It is typical to station two patrol officers in Evergreen to be more pro-active in anticipating requests for assistance. Although the number of calls steadily increases each year the Sheriff's Office has been able to maintain a relatively constant time in responding. This is partly due to stationing patrol officers in the field who are available to provide assistance on request and where needed. Specialty teams made up of existing sworn officers; including a Boat Patrol, Snow Mobile Patrol, S.W.A.T. Team and Bicycle Patrol provide alternative means to respond more quickly to calls for assistance.

The Sheriff's Office oversees other public safety functions. The Sheriff's Office provides administrative and operational oversight for citizen volunteer activities and groups. About 200 citizens volunteer for the county's search and rescue activities. These volunteers provide specialty emergency functions and can be called on at any time to locate and provide medical assistance to the people lost and injured in the wildlands. There are 22 sworn deputy reserves who may be called to assist other officers at organized events. The 90 person "Sheriff's Posse" assists with crowd control, at election polling places and other county sponsored and community events. The value to the community generated by Sheriff Office volunteer groups can not be overstated or over valued.

Law Enforcement Projections

The number of calls for assistance and initiated officer responses has continued to outpace the rate of population growth in the county. While the overall county grows at about two percent each year the number of requested response calls increases by more than 10 percent each year. Requests for assistance calls projected and adjusted to reflect five-year incremental increases are shown on Table 7.4. When contrasting the number of patrol officers to number of annual calls, each officer in the field responded to an average of 744 calls each year.

Table 7.4
Projected Flathead County Sheriff Office Calls for Assistance

Year	Projected number of calls for assistance
2000	22,400
2005	35,700
2010	50,400
2015	66,600
2020	84,400
2025	104,000

The current level of service for the Sheriff's Office is approximately 0.41 patrol officers per every 1,000 residents in the unincorporated county. It is a goal of the Sheriff's Office to increase public protection and support to one full time patrol officer per 1,000 residents. To maintain the current level of 0.41 patrol officers per 1,000 residents would require one additional patrol officer every two years through 2025. The number of calls for assistance is growing at more than 10 percent per year. If the status quo is maintained, with an additional officer hired every two years through 2025, the total number of calls per officer ratio would increase to 1,793 calls per officer per year. An additional 26 patrol officers would need to be hired by 2025 to obtain the goal of one patrol officer per 1,000 residents to produce a total of 112 patrol officers.

It is important that impacts of growth such as those referenced above are considered during the process of community development. Increasing population commonly increases crime. Improving and/or increasing the level of law enforcement services offered to residents of Flathead County is in the interest of all residents.

PART 5: Utility Services (see Goal 34)

County residents rely on many basic services such as utilities that help define their quality of life and maintain their health and well being. Utilities in Flathead County include natural gas, electricity, and telecommunication services. These services are usually taken for granted, but coordination and conscientious planning for future growth must be established to assure service is uninterrupted and adequate.

Communications Media

There are currently several Internet Service Providers that service Flathead County. These include About Montana, Access Montana, Cyberport and Montana Digital. Bresnan Communications offers cable and cable internet connections. Satellite and wireless services are available.

CenturyTel delivers advanced communications to Northwestern Montana. The company is a provider of consumer and business communications in rural areas and small to mid size cities in 26 states. Century Tel offers dial-up and DSL internet service. Although Century Tel primarily serves rural properties, approximately 79% of the company's

access lines are within 18,000 feet (just over three miles) of a central office or remote terminal, the maximum distance to which DSL can be enabled.

Phone service is offered by CenturyTel, Bresnan Communications and AT&T. Bresnan and AT&T do not have traditional land lines. Instead, the service is conducted over cable or internet. There are several cellular companies in the Flathead Valley.

Electrical Service

Flathead Electric Cooperative, Inc. (FEC) is a locally owned and operated cooperative and is the only supplier of both commercial and residential power to Flathead County. Flathead Electric Coop is the second largest electric utility in Montana with more than 44,500 members/customers. Over 3,800 miles of line serve the entire Flathead Valley and Libby. There were 2,189 new meters hooked up in 2005.

According to the 2004 FEC Annual Report, the Coop processed a record number of work orders and new services. Engineering released more than 2,700 jobs for construction taking in more than 125 new subdivisions. Underground cable replacement projects were completed in Desert Mountain, Kokanee Bend Subdivision, Rogers Lake Road and Peaceful Acres Subdivision. More than 416,000 feet of underground cable was installed, compared with 376,000 feet in 2003. Other projects completed in 2004 include U.S. Highway 93 from Four Corners to 13th Street in Kalispell, the Bigfork transmission rebuild, the Montana Avenue rebuild in Kalispell, design work for new substations in Lakeside and North Kalispell as well as a number of relocation projects related to highway construction. Replacement of standard electric meters with automated meter reading units continued, allowing the meters to be read electronically from the FEC office. More than 5,500 old standard meters were replaced with new automated meters in 2004. The 2004 report suggests that summer months are no longer the peak season for new service requests, but there is year round demand, and that demand is expected to continue.

Natural Gas Service

Northwest Energy is the only major supplier of natural gas to the Flathead Valley. There are 170,000 customers in Montana, with 70,500 square miles of service area. Pricing for natural gas is approved by the Montana Public Service Commission and is deregulated.

Utility Projections

As population increases, so will the demand for utility services. Availability of utilities plays a role in successful community development. Communications are a vital element in attracting new businesses to the county. For more on the importance of communications to a diverse economy, see Chapter 5, The Flathead Economy. Public health and safety is impacted by location of utilities on developed property. A meeting with representatives of the major utility companies revealed many concerns with development techniques that impact the provision of safe and convenient services now

and in the future. Foremost was the issue of locating utility easements in new developments. Increased coordination between utility companies and with the development process regarding locations of easements and locations of individual pipes and lines within easements would increase the safety of those working on the lines and residents nearby.